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COMMENTARY

A beleaguered Reagan on Central America

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On the vexing issue of communist expansion into Central America, the Reagan administration first blew hot with Alexander Haig's fulminations about "going to the source." When these threats disturbed Americans more than they intimidated Fidel Castro, White House staffers persuaded President Reagan to blow cold by taking the issue off the front burner.

While Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders was given policy control over a holding operation in El Salvador, the president maintained a low profile for some months in the hope the problem could be solved quietly. Instead, the domestic opponents of any kind of U.S. involvement used the White House's absence from the debate as an opportunity to mold American opinion, and the excesses of the right wing in El Salvador gave them plenty of ammunition. The presidential speech to both houses of Congress this week was a belated attempt to rebuild a national consensus on the need for action.

But it will take more than one eloquent speech on a single dramatic occasion to shift the direction of American public opinion. The fortuitous discovery of arms disguised as medicines on the Libyan planes bound for Nicaragua is helpful but not enough. As Castro has boasted, the outcome of the struggle in Central America is likely to be settled in the halls of the U.S. Congress, and there the tide is running against the president.

Part of the administration's problem in making its case has been the continuing conflict between the intelligence community's determination not to reveal sensitive sources and the desire of the policy advocates to surface the most conclusive possible evidence of Soviet-Cuban inter-

vention. For example, ex-Sen. Richard Stone, the administration's point man for publicity on Central America, has written CIA Director William Casey two urgent memoranda pleading for release of the definitive evidence of Cuban control of the Salvadoran guerrillas.

On balance, however, the intelligence community has tended to win these battles, and policymakers complain that even the best intelligence no longer will be relevant if entire countries are lost because of a failure to use it in time to convince the skeptics. It has been particularly frustrating not to be able to employ irrefutable proof of Cuban control against the naive contention that the Salvadoran guerrillas are indigenous reformers.

The administration is solidly united on the strategic necessity of providing the Salvadoran government with enough military and economic aid to prevent a guerrilla victory and it has come around to

accepting the need for land reform and improved human rights performance.

But on the timing and scale of the current covert action program the CIA has been directed to mount in order to harass the Sandinista regime, there is growing division among the best-informed experts in the administration. As one put it starkly to this reporter, "I'm afraid we are seeing in slow motion a replay of the Bay of Pigs."

When asked to explain so ominous a comparison, he ticked off the indicators of a potential disaster in the making. In the first place, he maintained that the guerrilla force

of Nicaraguan exiles that had moved across the border from Honduras into Nicaragua numbered about 6,500 men as compared with a Russian-equipped Sandinista army of 25,000 and a militia of 50,000. He argued that as at the Bay of Pigs the

boys to do a man's job and that it would have been better to hold this force in reserve as a threat while building up its strength to a more credible level.

Other critics of this overt-covert operation within the administration warn that it may be very difficult to maintain these guerrillas even as an harassing force inside Nicaragua. In view of the ambiguity of the Boland amendment, with its prohibition of any covert support that has as its purpose the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, a confused and debilitating debate in the U.S. Congress can easily lead to a cutoff of all U.S. covert assistance. In its present mood, Congress is not likely to replace secret aid with open funding.

Although the Nicaraguan exile

guerrillas are receiving substantial local support from small farmers in the northern border area, there is no sign yet of any spontaneous mass defection to their cause. The main force of the Sandinista army has not yet been committed, and Castro is in a strong position to escalate if necessary with secret infiltration of elite Cuban troops, as he did in Angola.

The administration's internal critics of this operation fear that these risks were not sufficiently considered when it was undertaken. If it fails, not only the Nicaraguan exiles but the friendly Honduran government will be badly hurt.

A slow-motion Bay of Pigs of this dimension would finally alert both the Reagan administration and the country as a whole to the size of the problem we face in Central America and to the fact that it cannot be dealt with on the cheap. Years of sustained, consistent effort to build the political freedoms and the economic and military strength of our non-communist allies are going to be necessary.